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Not every day you find yourself in Putin's crosshairs, but that's exactly where I was on January 8, 2009. ...more



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Ex-Reuters Senior Correspondent | Eurasia & Beyond | Eyewitness Archive

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Not every day you find yourself in Putin's crosshairs, but that's exactly where I was on January 8, 2009.

The mood was frosty, both literally and geopolitically. Russia had once again wielded its energy weapon: a gas war aimed at Ukraine, with Europe in the crossfire. A busload of us - journos from [AFP](#), [Bloomberg News](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), [Financial Times](#) and others - made our way to Putin's dacha for the Kremlin's version of gas-cut diplomacy.

This was still the era of "friendly Putin," who had stepped down a year earlier to "respect" the two-term constitutional limit. His successor, Medvedev, would soon prove to be a mere placeholder. But at this point, Putin was eager to appear a pragmatic partner to the West.

Western foreign correspondents were expats, i.e. somewhat shielded. Russian nationals hired by foreign media walked a razor-thin balancing act. Natively fluent in reading the regime's playbook, we faced higher risks and knew how to spot the traps. We were an anomaly - seen by the Kremlin as neither controllable nor entirely foreign in those deceptively "vegetarian" times.

Putin's patronizing friendliness evaporated when it was my turn to pose a question.

My former bureau chief would later write, in a [Reuters](#) tribute marking the end of my decade as a Kremlin reporter before I emigrated from Russia: "It's easy to forget how tough that assignment is; you're operating in an environment where officials view you with suspicion, [...] you're fighting tiredness, appalling comms, logistical nightmares -- and all the same you need to file some of the most significant news a Reuters reporter has ever had to file. Denis did all that, with aplomb."

Honestly, I'm not sure if that was my aplomb moment. But I pressed with the most troubling query: What's next in the Kremlin arsenal? "If the measures Russia has taken fail to influence Ukraine, can it expect new and tougher steps on Moscow's part?" I was voicing growing concern in Western capitals.

But Putin's reply was clipped, a sudden crack in the mask that laid bare the limits of his strategic patience. I felt it.

His irritated "What else can be done?" now reads like writing on the wall. That "what else" became the Crimea annexation in 2014 and a full-scale war in 2022.

[Stephen](#), Andrew, and other peers pressed Putin with further questions. And some of the people at that table would soon end up in the Kremlin's bad books. Gazeta Wyborcza's Wacław Radziwinowicz was expelled; [The Guardian's Luke Harding](#) later testified about FSB harassment.

See us all in this footage (I'm 4th from Putin - gray blazer, glasses): <https://lnkd.in/gjyEXT2c>

The transcript: <https://lnkd.in/gFQJ9yG2>

Pics/Video: Reuters archives / official handout.

Personal reflections from a former Reuters Kremlin correspondent.

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Views are my own and do not represent the Government of Canada. Les opinions exprimées sont personnelles et ne représentent pas celles du gouvernement du Canada.

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Stephen Bierman · 1st

Communications, Journalism, Energy

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I remember that presser and that new years week obviously. good characterisation of the atmosphere.

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